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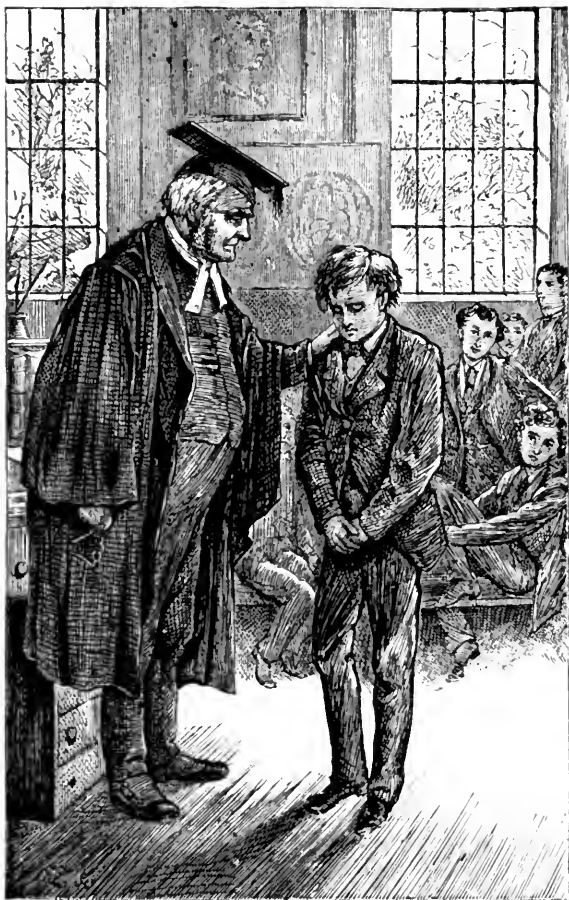


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Joseph C. Harris  
from  
Grace Church S School.  
Christmas,  
1873.



"'You have had a bitter lesson, my young friend,' said the Doctor."

# ALEC DEVLIN;

OR,

## CHOOSE WISELY.

BY

MRS. FENTON AYLMER.

*WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.*



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# ALEC DEVLIN.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE HOUSE ON FIRE.

**I**F you have ever had the good fortune to see a forest and moorland country, you will be able to appreciate the picture I am going to try and describe, namely, the view that was commanded by the flower-garden at Poffington Minster. Walking out of the French window in the morning-room of the Manor House, the first thing that struck the eye was a billowy green sea of trees, across which undulated waves tinted with brown, purple, blue and white, melting

away in the far east into a misty gray belt, which effectually hid the mysterious line where sky and earth seem to "mix and commingle." This was the New Forest, the famous hunting-ground, whose formation brought to a climax the unlucky career of William Rufus, and in whose shades he met a just retribution for a life of cruelty and extortion. One well acquainted with forest landmarks can point out from Poffington the glade where, carefully enclosed, stands the tree root, from off whose stem the fatal arrow of Sir Walter Tyrrel glanced.

Southward, the country bears a different character, fields and parks, village and mansion, lead to a line of blue hills, along whose crests white clouds are lazily rolling, carrying the gazer's eye eastward to the land of brown moss and purple heath, a country belted seawards by smooth green downs, behind which, you know, lie white cliffs and glorious blue waves.

Northward, lies the strangest picture of all, a

straight sea line, suddenly breaking inland, and running up in every fantastic shape to form Poole Harbour, in whose blue setting Branksea Island stands out like a many-tinted gem. In this view, there is water gleaming out here, there, and everywhere, while in the midst rises the square tower of Wimborne Minster, surrounded by many-coloured roofs and the greenest of green fields. The Purbeck Hills, famed for their fine stone quarries, close in the prospect, and in the valley near Wareham you just catch a glimpse of Corfe Castle, where Edward the Martyr was murdered by his cruel step-mother, Elfrida. The castle is now in ruins, but the gateway where the king was stabbed is still to be seen.

Such being the view from Poffington, you cannot much wonder that Madge Devlin having finished attending to her favourite rose-trees, should stand gazing admiringly round, letting her clear blue eyes single out first one well-known point, then another. Madge's father was the

owner of the Manor House, and as her mother was a confirmed invalid, in her own opinion, the charge of the flowers, &c., all devolved upon Madge.

So it was quite natural that upon the bright spring morning I am writing of, her brother Alec having urgent cause to seek her counsel, should at once rush off to the flower garden, shouting as he caught sight of her,

“Hallo! here’s a lark; a boy has brought a couple of splendid rabbits to sell; may I have them?”

Madge looked grave. She remembered several pets, and how enthusiastically they had been welcomed, how soon their daily wants had become a trouble, and when, after a brief unhappy existence, they died—how all the old enthusiasm burst forth again, showing itself in sobs, tears, and a careful funeral. Many a time she had hoped no more pets would be brought home, and now here was Alec begging for rabbits!

“Come and look at them,” he urged ; “they are lop-eared and such beauties !” So there was nothing for the sister to do but follow to the yard, where a country lad was standing by a covered basket, the lid of which being raised disclosed two large rabbits, one white, the other black and white.

“Aren’t they lovely, Madge ? Look at their ears, hanging straight down, real lops ! and the boy only wants three shillings.” Then drawing Madge aside, he added in a whisper, “Fred Wilson gave ten shillings for his, and won’t he be savage when he sees I’ve got better.”

“I won’t say anything, Alec. Go and tell papa.”

And away Alec ran, dashing into his father’s study, where he was as usual poring over chemical experiments. The draught from the suddenly-opened door sent a higher flame from the lamp before him. The flame caught the contents of a metal dish ; fizz ! went a wreath of blue smoke,

and the anxious labour of whole days was dispersed. Mr. Devlin was, you may be sure, a very patient man, for he only sighed, extinguished the lamp, and taking off his spectacles, leant back in his chair. Alec was in too great a hurry to notice the mischief he had done; he could think of nothing, you see, just then but his rabbits and his own gratification. His father looked piteously at the scattered chemicals and open door, saying—

“Rabbits! Yes, as many as you like; only shut the door, and send Madge here.”

Alec required no second telling, he was off in a moment, and Madge, having given the money, went to her father, whom she found bathing his head with a sponge.

“Are you ill, papa, dear?” was her first question.

“I don’t know,—I think I must be, so little upsets me and causes this nervous headache. Poor Alec rushed in like a whirlwind just now, spoilt my week’s work, and this is the result; but



don't say anything, love. I sent for you, to ask you to ride over to Bournemouth and get these few ingredients from Carter. He sent them quite wrong the other day. You had better take the brown mare. Tom of course can go with you. Your mother is not well enough to drive to-day."

Madge tried to persuade him to go out, but without success. Nothing would tempt him away from his favourite work ; so, very reluctantly she gave in, and went off to order the horses. Alec was still in the stable-yard, watching the rabbits nibbling up the clover and grass.

"Look ! only look !" he shouted. "They are perfectly tame, and know me already. Oh ! won't Wilson be jolly jealous !"

"That's twice you've mentioned Fred's name, Alec." And Madge looked vexed. "You don't mean to say you've only bought the rabbits to spite him ?"

"Well no, not altogether, but partly. You see Wilson is such a bumptious fellow, always bragg-

ing of what his people are, and how rich he will be some day. Only last Wednesday he told me his grandfather had a handle to his name ; I didn't know a bit what he meant, though I pretended I did, and said that was nothing to boast of. What did he mean, Madge ? You know everything."

Madge had seated herself upon a log of wood to wait until the groom came back from his dinner, so had time to answer Alec's question. The first thing she said, " You little goose, for one thing, buying rabbits to tease Fred Wilson ; for another, to care one bit for his bragging—a handle to a name is slang."

" I know that ; but what does it mean ?"

" It means a title."

" Oh ! then Wilson's grandfather was a duke or a lord. Have we no relations with handles to their names ?"

" I never heard of any. But you are none the less a gentleman as long as you behave like one.

You remember what I told you constituted good breeding?"

"Yes, truth, honour, and honesty."

"Add the fear of God, and you have the truest of all gentlemen."

"Yes, Madge, I know all that, and I like to believe it too; but it riles a fellow to hear a bumptious chap like Wilson passing himself off for a swell. I told him we were all descended from Adam, but he said, that was before the flood; and to be sure it's a long time ago."

There was a little pause, during which the rabbits performed some very laughable gymnastic feats. Then Madge went on—

"Did I ever tell you a story of the bishop who took two fieldfares for his crest, Alec? Well, he once was very poor, so poor that his parents could not afford to send him to school. He was very sorry, for he was anxious to learn. It happened that one day he caught two fieldfares, and took them to the schoolmaster. Instead of taking

the pennies the man offered, he said, 'No thank you, sir; please teach me to read,' which so pleased the master, that from that day he taught him free, and when in due time the boy having become a bishop was obliged to chose a crest, he took two fieldfares, saying, 'They will remind my children of what I once was.'"

"I'll tell Wilson that; very likely his grandfather was a bishop, and that will settle him. There's Tom now, and when you're away I'll try to get some one to help to knock up a house for my lop-cars."

This was, however, not so easy. The stable-boy was away, the gardener too busy, and no one but women left. What was to be done? Alec was in despair, and after thinking of every plan—looking in every corner for a barrel or box, as a temporary domicile, he stood scratching his head, the picture of despair, when a handsome face looked over the Rectory field railing, and a cheery voice cried—

"What's gone wrong, youngster? You look as if you couldn't help it."

Alec put his cap on and laughed. "Well, neither I can; it's a horrid shame. Here's Madge bought me a pair of lop-ears, and there's not a soul to help me to make a house for them. Tom's gone with Madge; Jem's off somewhere else; and Clarke is as cross as his own peasticks."

"What do you say to my helping you?" And as he spoke Jack Hay vaulted over the fence, and was received by Alec with a torrent of thanks, finishing up with, "And by Jove you are a brick."

"Who taught you to swear, my boy?" asked Jack, looking down from his seventeen-years' superior height; "you are just a leetle too young for that game."

"Don't you ever say 'By Jove,' Jack?"

"If I was to put my finger in the hinge of that gate and jam it off, would you put yours too?"

"No, certainly not."

"Then why should you quote me? I don't suppose Madge would like you to swear."

"Oh! she's a girl, and girls are always at fellows. They cannot say things themselves, so they are jealous."

"Upon my word you are a nice boy of your age! In my young days I was taught that swearing was sinful, and that to have a sister was a great blessing."

"Things change very much," remarked Alec sententiously, trying to remember what Wilson had told him about the way fellows at the public schools talked.

"It don't seem as if it was for the better," observed Jack; "but we must set to work, young man, or Madge will catch us idling."

So it was that by the time the brown mare's shapely head appeared in the lane, a very creditable structure had been erected, and as soon as Madge was out of her saddle she was called to

witness the introduction of the rabbits to their future home. After which Jack Hay walked up to the house with her, telling her with rather an unsteady voice and grave face, that he was to leave the Rectory in June, and go up for the competitive examination preparatory to getting his commission. Madge was very sorry, not only because she liked Jack very much, but because his influence over Alec had been a safeguard and comfort.

Poor Madge! Little did she think that far bitterer and closer trials would make her almost forget Jack Hay's departure, and that before June she would be away from her pretty home. So mercifully does our Heavenly Father hide away from our longing eyes the mysterious future.

Madge was very fond of getting the start of every one in the house, and, by coming down before even the servants were out of bed, stealing a lonely quiet hour out of the day. Everything was so fresh and sweet and peaceful in those

early spring mornings, when dew lay like diamonds upon every young leaf and blade of grass, and the air, scented by lilac and hawthorn, was one concert of bird music. Madge's room faced the rising sun, and the first ray gleaming in upon her sweet face, caused her blue eyes to open, and saw her jump out of bed and cross to the window, eager to catch a glimpse of the royal clouds of crimson, purple, and gold, that fall from King Sol's shoulders as he begins his daily journey.

June, the sweetest month in all the year, had come again, and upon its first morning, earlier even than usual, Madge opened the front door; and after a long breath of fresh sweet air, walked across the gravel towards her favourite roses, now all glittering, and ready to shower down a perfect torrent of dewy tears upon the earth. Birds and butterflies were everywhere. Bees hunted out their store in every flower. Suddenly, across the garden curled a white cloud of smoke; Madge



turned quickly towards the house, and for a moment stood transfixed, a scream dying away upon her pale lips. The house was on fire, and a volume of smoke was rushing from the study window.

Madge soon recovered her presence of mind, and running to the end of the house from which her father's bedroom window looked, she threw up a handful of gravel. The glass crashed in and almost immediately her father appeared.

"Come down! come down! the study is on fire!"

He threw open the sash and looked out, understanding the situation directly.

"Run to the lodge; tell them to go for help."

Madge was off down the drive as fast as she could go. The people were up, and were standing with scared white faces listening to her directions, when loud shouts were heard on the road, and a number of people headed by Mr. Wilson came running up. He had seen the fire

from his house, and catching hold of Madge's hand, said, "Tell me about it as we go, my dear." But poor Madge had nothing to say, if even she could have spared breath to speak.

Mrs. Devlin, the children, and servants were already on the lawn, huddled together in a frightened group, wrapt in all sorts of nondescript garments, while Mr. Devlin and Alec were dragging out furniture, pictures and books, whatever came first.

Have you ever seen a house on fire? I have, and can assure you it is one of the most miserable and sad sights in the world. Sometimes, when the fire is in a crowded London street, it is awful. Fortunately the inmates of Poffington Manor were all safe, and with such hearty goodwill did the people work, that although there was no chance of saving the house, the furniture and other things were nearly all safe, though scattered over the garden in every direction.

The fire soon had it all its own way, the dry old timber burning like tinder, and it soon became dangerous to go into the house, in case the roof might fall. It was only at this time that Madge remembered her canary, and, looking up at her bedroom window, saw him fluttering wildly about in his cage.

“Oh, my darling bird! he'll be burnt to death!” cried Madge.

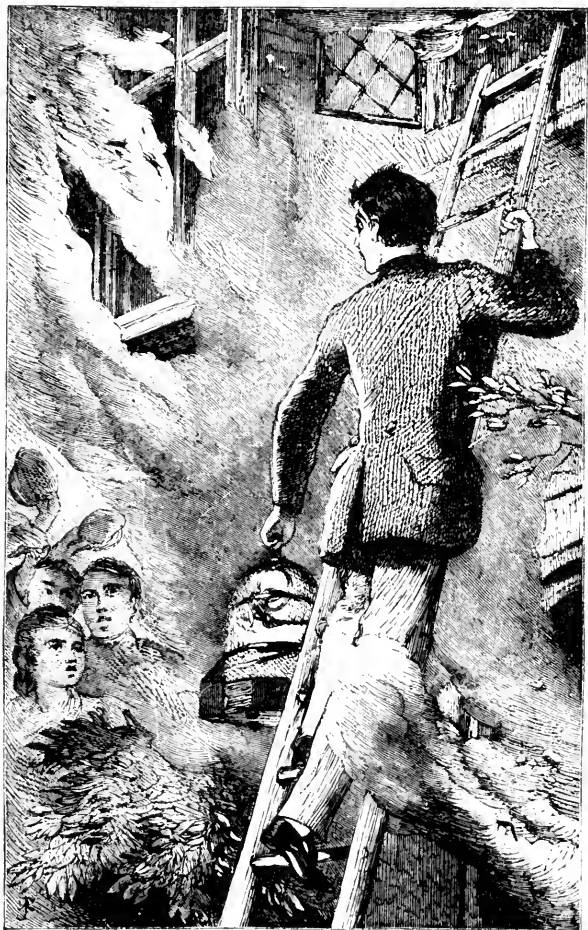
Jack Hay was standing beside her wiping the black and heat off his face. In an instant he was off, crying to Alec, “Get the ladder up to the window—look sharp! Madge shall not lose her pet.”

And before any one could interfere Jack had disappeared in at the front door. There was a general cry that he would lose his life for a bird, and the rector, frightened and angry at the same time, scolded Madge roundly for drawing the boy's attention to her bird. Poor Madge, who would have given worlds to bring him back,

could only cover her white face, and pray to God to guard Jack, whose black, excited face speedily appeared at the bedroom window, to be greeted by a tremendous cheer. The ladder was all ready, so it was very short work to carry the cage with its frightened little prisoner down.

Of course you admire and love Jack for saving the canary, and so of course did everybody there, even the rector, although he pretended to scold his pupil for being so rash. All Madge could say was, "Oh, thank you, dear Jack," but many a day and night after, when Jack was in far greater danger, and fighting or fever were round him, Madge's words came back to his memory, and helped him to do and dare.

It is useless dwelling upon the sad scene. All day and all night the fire smouldered on, and crowds of country people came to stare and wonder. The pretty garden was trodden down; all Madge's favourite flowers trampled and broken. The family were at Mr. Wilson's, and the ser-



Jack Hay rescues the Bird.



vants some here, some there in the village; then, when some arrangement had been made about the furniture, the Devlins went to lodgings in Bournemouth, where poor Mr. Devlin was laid up by a nervous attack, from which he was only recovering when Alec, after spending his Midsummer holidays at the Hays', came back with the news that Jack had passed very high, and been gazetted to a regiment serving in India.

"It will be awfully slow at the Rectory next half without Jack, and Fred Wilson will have it all his own way," said Alec, after telling Madge his adventures at Haythorp. "Do you think papa will let me go somewhere else?"

"Perhaps so, dear. You know we shall not be able to go back to Poffington for a long time."

Alec looked graver, and coming close to his sister, whispered, "I heard a gentleman at Haythorp say papa would not be able to build up the Manor House, because he was in difficulties."

Madge's cheeks grew paler. "You should not listen to, or at any rate repeat, such things, Alec. I never heard papa say he was short of money. Now off you go ; I've lots to do before mamma wants me to drive with her."

It was only a week later, however, that the truth came to poor Madge. Her father, who was still very weak, called her one evening and bade her read and copy a letter he had just written to his solicitor. Madge read it through with a changing countenance. "I don't quite understand, papa. Do you mean that you want to borrow money to pay the people at Poffington?"

Her father put his arm round her waist and drew her to his side—

"Even so, love. I cannot pay the poor people who worked for me without borrowing. This, and then, and then——"

He covered his face with his hand.

"My own dear papa, why didn't you tell us long ago?"



“ My child, I could not, I was a coward.”

“ Then mamma, she does not know ?”

“ Yes, Madge, your mother has known all along, but I do not think she believes it.”

“ But why not have told me ?”

“ You caused me no expense you could spare, and the knowledge was sad enough to endure by myself, without clouding your peace too. I could not afford to lose your bright smile, child, that is the truth. But for the fire I might have managed ; and have made me rich in the discovery, which I have been following up for years. Now that hope is gone, and all is lost.”

“ Is there nothing you can sell, papa, to get this money ?”

“ I have thought it over in every light, and everything is uncertain ; the Brandreth Railway people may gain their lawsuit, but it is very doubtful ; and there is no chance of the Rock Wharfage Company gaining their demand. No, Madge, it must be met ; your mother’s money is

safe, and the Manor Farm is entailed, but for several years the rent must go to my creditors."

Madge made no answer. She was trying to realise the full force of such a calamity as that before them all, but the thought was too new—she could not yet grasp the stern reality—and so happily could, by her very cheerfulness, help and encourage her father.

"You take it very quietly, Madge," he said, wonderingly. "Do you quite comprehend me, that we must sell horses, cows, furniture, pictures, everything you have been used to think necessities of your daily life, and go into some cheap cottage? I do not care for myself—where I have my children is my home; but your mother—what will she do?"

Before Madge could answer, Mr. Devlin put his hands to his temples with a strange, wild look.

"Are you ill, papa?" she asked.

"I—I don't know, my head seems to wander.

Don't be frightened. It is the bells, perhaps. Why are they ringing?" Then his hands fell, and his head drooped upon his breast. His face was ghastly now, and Madge, terribly frightened, ran to the sideboard and poured out a glass of wine. He made no effort to take it, but said, "Put it to my lips, dear." Then the dreadful truth broke upon the girl: her father was paralysed.

"Send for the doctor, but don't disturb anyone," were his next words, spoken with evident difficulty. Madge rang the bell, the man-servant entering, gave only one look at his master, and scarcely hearing Madge's words, snatched a cap of Alec's from the hall table, and dashed down the road.

Oh! what a long five minutes that was, before the welcome sound of wheels announced the doctor!

Dr. Mordaunt was an old friend; he had been attending Mr. Devlin for years, and knew too

well what had happened, still he was anxious to break it gradually to Madge, and saying quietly—

“Feeling a little faint, Devlin? Get me some hot water, Madge. See to it yourself, to make sure it is boiling, and have plenty of it.” Then as soon as she was out of the room, he said—

“This is sudden, my friend. You’ve been distressing yourself. I told you how cautious you must be. Now we must try to fight it down. Put your arms round me. Ah!” he added, as Mr. Devlin shook his head, “so bad! Poor fellow!” Then beckoning to the man-servant, together they carried the sick man to his bedroom. When Madge brought the hot water, being told to wait in the passage, she stood by the window that overlooked the road, scarcely venturing to think. Carriages full of happy-looking faces rolled past; the shore was gay with people, and the sea sparkling in the sunlight. From her father’s room came that saddest of all

sounds, the dim whisper of muffled voices and footsteps. At last the doctor came out. He took Madge's cold hand in his.

"Your father wishes me to tell you that——"

"Oh, don't! don't!" cried the girl, putting her hand over her ears to shut out the dreadful words. "I know what you mean—only don't say it! My own dear papa!—my own dear papa!"

"You must be brave, Madge; so much will depend upon you. He is so anxious to have you with him. But I cannot let you go unless you promise to control yourself, and think only of his comfort."

"I will! I will! Doctor Mordaunt! I'll do any thing to be near him always. May I go now? Look! I am quite calm."

Poor child. She turned her face, with its white cheeks, wild eyes, and hard-drawn lips to the doctor, knowing he could only see the mask, and could not count the burning throbs that were thumping against her temples, or see

the tears she was beating back into her sick sinking heart. But although he could not see this, he could guess it. And knowing what a treasure Madge was, and how well she deserved the great love with which her father loved her, he knew he could do nothing better or kinder than constitute her nurse, and give her full charge of the sick-room.

Her father lay almost as if asleep, but a smile lighted his face, as Madge clasped his hand, covering it with kisses, and whispering all sorts of caressing, loving words. The doctor was content now, and going down stairs into the drawing-room, waited for the return of Mrs. Devlin from her daily drive.

Mrs. Devlin was an old patient, and under a good deal of affectation and selfishness, there lurked just enough real disease to make any sudden emotion dangerous. And well it was he remained. Poor Mrs. Devlin was as attached to her husband as a woman pampered and spoilt

from childhood well could be. Tottering from weakness and agitation she reached the bedroom.

A great change had taken place even during that short space. Death was very near. There was only one long loving look in his wife's face, and without a struggle his spirit returned to Him who gave it.





## CHAPTER II.

### BROTHER AND SISTER.



WHEN Madge Devlin awoke upon the morning of the day after her father's funeral, it seemed as if the night had insensibly led her into a new life, and not only that her very nature seemed changed, but she felt older, stronger; her thoughts came more clearly before her. Sitting up in bed, she could look at the blue sea and the white manes of the sea-horses as they flew before the west wind across the rippling waves; above, spread a deep blue sky, all flecked with those vapour-like broken clouds, which sailors say portend wind. It was a



glorious morning, sky and sea dimpling and smiling ; but there was no answering smile upon the girl's face. Gradually, as she gazed, a quiet, steadfast expression shone out of her eyes, and sat upon her lips, and into her heart came words that have comforted many a mourner—"As thy day, so shall thy strength be." As Madge passed Alec's room, she looked in. He started up, his eyes red with crying ; in a minute his sister's arms were round him.

"I could not sleep a bit, Madge. Whenever I shut my eyes I saw it all before me—all the black things—and then I thought of all the times I might have tried to help and please papa, and how I never thought, and then about having so little to live upon, and having to work, and I don't know what I can do, or what I am fit for."

Now although I have written down this long speech of Alec's free from interruption, it was to render it intelligible ; the truth being that it was broken in upon by many sobs, and

sometimes, too, by kind, loving words from Madge.

Alec had, you see, one of those strong, passionate natures which take everything in the extreme, and must, while untutored and unguided, lead to many a self-trial. Poor Alec, the night had indeed been a terrible one. He had, as he said, passed it in tears and agony of mind known only to his Heavenly Father and himself. A hundred little acts of carelessness, a hundred slightly-obeyed orders or requests, impatience against his father's rules, wilful disobedience,—all these came back freshly upon his memory, wringing his heart with unavailing regrets. Then, too, came the cold, crushing sense of poverty, mingled with an undefined, but less intense, apprehension of the future. All these things rushing upon the boy's heated and worn-out senses, had driven all rest or sleep away, and left a racking headache. Gladly he responded to Madge's advice, and, getting up,

plunged his throbbing head into a basin of cold water, whilst his sister, looking amongst his clothes, found a pair of black-and-white trousers which she said would do very well to wear every day. Helped by her nimble fingers and cheered by her words, the boy did not take long to dress.

“There is your tie. That is all right. Now your cap. Never mind your eyes; no one is out, and the wind will soon cool them.”

So spoke Madge, but the wind very nearly upset all her work, for the first rushing gust that swept over the sea brought a gasping sob from Alec's heart, and a voice he scarcely recognised as his own cried beseechingly—

“What shall I do! What shall I do!”

The impulse of despair only existed for a moment, for instantly Madge's arm was in his, and her firm sweet voice speaking—

“You shall do all God gives you, my own brave brother; there is plenty of time to think

over all you have to do. Now, you must not give way to despondency, but think of mamma, and that, dreadful as this is to us, it must be worse for her. You are tired, poor boy, and last night has made you really ill. Oh! look there, Alec, there's the very thing—a man with hot coffee. You did not eat anything yesterday; there he comes; I'll just stop him, and we'll each have a cup."

Even at that moment the idea of buying coffee from a man like that, shocked Alec's dignity. He was even going to object, and say he would rather wait until he got home, but then he remembered the coffee was only a penny a cup, and that now he was poor he ought to be glad to get it so cheap; and glancing round to see if any one else was near, and seeing no one he followed Madge, and was, in his heart, very glad of the steaming cup of hot coffee, to say nothing of a thick slice of bread-and-butter.

"I'm here most marnin's, miss," the man said,

as they finished, "on my ways to the boatmen and bathin' folk ; for, you sees, when they comes up out o' the water they relishes a cup o' hot coffee, and bathing do give a happetite ; so if you're here you'll have the best, as the first cup allus do be." So touching his hat, he rolled his apparatus away.

"You are a regular witch, Madge," said Alec, looking ever so much brighter and better, "you think of everything. I didn't know I was hungry until you told me so, and if I had, I'd never have thought of going to a fellow like that, who I always thought was only for cads. But he had everything as bright and clean as a new pin, and only a penny a cup, and a penny for that great slice of bread-and-butter. It cannot cost so much to buy things for a house if you can get bread, butter, coffee, milk, and sugar so cheap."

Madge smiled, but said nothing. The truth was, her ideas upon housekeeping were very vague, and as it was to be her duty to rule their small

household, and teach the younger ones to be careful and economical, she knew she had better not let Alec discover her ignorance, but trust that by some means she would be able to learn and practise her new duties.

During that morning's walk they tried to realise the new life before them, and form some plan of life, but all ended in the foregone conclusion that they must have patience, and wait until the final arrangement of Mr. Devlin's affairs gave them a definite income.

As they entered the house, Madge put her arm round Alec's neck, looking into his face with her steadfast eyes. "You will make yourself patient?" she said, earnestly.

Alec nodded and kissed her.

That morning's conversation had a great effect upon Alec ; he could not help seeing and admiring his sister's quiet courage and faith ; so he said to himself over and over again that if she, a girl, could bear up and face their difficulties so

calmly and bravely, of course he, a boy, must do so, too. So right honestly and earnestly did he follow his sister's lead, and so long as he was under her influence he acted conscientiously and up to his determination.





## CHAPTER III.

### LIFE AT COLLEGE.

**T**HERE followed several weeks of uncertainty and anxiety, and then, before the lawyers settled anything, Alec went to Durkton College, an old friend of Mrs. Devlin having given him a nomination. Alec liked this much better than going back to Poffington, though the Rector offered to take him almost free. Fred Wilson was there still, and Alec could not bear the idea of being looked upon in the way he was quite sure Master Fred would look on him.

Madge missed her brother very much, for, young as he was, the last two months had



caused him to think, and made him appear sensible and considerate beyond his age. Alec's great fault had been instability. Changeable as the wind, biassed by every new friend's opinion, the boy had hitherto never seemed to possess a will or mind of his own, and Madge, who well knew her brother's failing, fondly hoped that a large school, which is a boy's world, would strengthen and fix this new part in his character.

At last the suspense was over ; Mr. Devlin's debts were paid, and an income of about £300 a year secured to the widow and family. Now came the important matter of settling upon a residence, and, much to Madge's disappointment, her mother decided upon going to live in London.

"There," she argued, "I can see people moving about, and when I am able, I can get into the park and watch the carriages. It is all very well for children and young people to talk of the country. I am too old to care for new friends, and, indeed, we are far too poor to make friends."

Madge sighed and thought of the children's rosy cheeks. But then, it was her mother's comfort that must be consulted, and children easily learn to accommodate themselves to circumstances ; indeed, the prospect of going to London was hailed in the nursery as the height of happiness, and the intervening weeks, while the house was being found and furnished, passed in continual anticipation of the sights to be seen, and playing at wild beasts in the Zoo.

Their new home was a small house in Kensington, very near the gardens, and for the sort of street and part, wonderfully airy and cheerful. Madge, who was to be housekeeper, had been busily engaged reading every cookery-book she could find, besides getting the mistress of the house they had been lodging in at Bournemouth to give her some practical knowledge. Now began her work in earnest, helped, or at least looked at, by a servant sent from a register-office near them. Up at daybreak herself, Madge generally managed to

get the girl out of bed about seven. This went on for a fortnight, then a change came. The patient kindness with which Madge met her failings or carelessness seemed to thaw the ice gradually the hard lines about her face softened, her hair showed symptoms of brushing; a clean cap, then a print dress made their appearance, white aprons followed, until at last the dirty slatternly girl, who had apparently taken the situation to save herself from starvation, came out a bright-faced, smart waiting-maid, ready to do any work, and perfectly devoted in her affection for Madge. Such a change, gradual though it had been, was too great to escape comment.

“Mamma thought you were a new servant to-day, Bridget,” said Madge, as she was doing some cooking one afternoon, “and to tell you the truth, I’ve often been puzzled at the change myself. What made you keep all your nice things locked away, and go about untidy and dirty?”

Bridget’s face grew very red. “Faith, miss,

I'd a notion ye wor just slave-drivers like the rest on 'em. When I came fresh from the ould country I'd hev known true quality when I seed them, but ye see, miss, darlint, the knowledge was all starved and druv out o' me, and it was only by glimmeries the sinse came back to me, and shure it was your own swate self that made a new girrel av me, and I'd work me fingers to the bone fur you, Miss Madge, mavourneen, and that the Lord above knows is the truth." The tears were in Bridget's eyes and her cheeks glowing with earnestness.

"You are a very good girl, Bridget," said Madge, "and I am very much obliged to you for liking me. I wish we could give you higher wages now you are so useful."

Bridget rushed across the kitchen and standing right in front of Madge, with eyes flashing fiercely through the tears, "Av ye spake one worrid about thim dirty wages, I'll pack up me boxes and go off to the slave-drivers agin. With the bit and

the sup, and a new print gownd now and thin, what'll I be wanting for more? Except then ye'd tache me to read. Then I'd learn the cookery-book."

Madge promised, glad to think she could return Bridget's good nature, and the maid went on with brightened face,

"Shure I know the ah, bey, cey, miss, it's the big worrids that take the sinse out o' me. Shure we've nothin' the like of them in Ireland, except maybe amongst the quality. I had an aunt onst now, me mother's own sister, that lived lady's-maid up at the Castle, and when she come home, she brought a powerful big book chock full av printin'. Well, she'd sit down foremost a little table, wiv the book open, and readin' and readin' the same, until the neighbours thought her as cliver as the praste himself. One day, when the family was back at the Castle, who should come in but Lady Kate, bringin' a fine handsome English gentleman, who, ses she, writes books and

wants to see what we are like at this side of the water. 'Shure, Mrs. Macarthy, ye sent your children to school, didn't ye?' And thin before me mother could answer, she stepped up to Aunt Molly, followed by the gentleman, and together they looked over her shoulder. She was readin', ye see. Lady Kate's purty face grew all red as a rose, and the gentleman began to laugh, then he made Aunt Molly a beautiful bow, and ses he, 'I hope ye foind the Dictionary plisant readin', ma'am,' and Aunt Molly, who knew how to spake to the quality, got up, and makin' a curtsey, ses she with a sigh, 'Faith, my Lord, its moighty dry readin'.' With that Lady Kate laughed loud out, and popping half-a-crown into Aunt Molly's hand, ran out of the place, and we heard her laughing all the way down the road."

Madge was laughing, too, so heartily that Nelly came to hear what the fun was, and carried the story up to Mrs. Devlin, who said she had heard

it before, though Nelly's way of mimicking Bridget's accent and manner, made her laugh.

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While these things were going on in the little home in London, Alec was doing his best to settle down to his new life at Durkton. At first it was no easy matter to keep clear of rows ; the boys finding he had never been away from home made up their minds he must be what they called a "milk-sop" and played him all sorts of tricks, until one night they ventured rather too far. Alec, on jumping into bed, found it soaking with water. This was too much. Looking quickly around, even before he got out again, he caught sight of a boy sitting half in bed watching him. With one bound Alec was at him, hauling the clothes off and screaming, "Come out, you cowardly sneak, and I'll give it you!"

In vain the boy held on by the mattress, and begged Alec not to make such a row. Alec's temper was up, he didn't care who heard him,

and only shouted louder as he pulled at the boy's legs, "You shall have it, you sneak," not even stopping, though the matron and a master rushed into the room, demanding what the disturbance was.

At last Alec let the boy's legs go, and panting with anger and exertion turned upon the matron, who saw at once that, whatever the cause of dispute was, Alec was the injured or insulted party.

The master took the boy's hand and bade him sit up and explain, which he did not however do, only rubbing his ankles where the mark of Alec's clutch was very visible, and blubbering.

"Well then, Devlin, will *you* speak? What has happened to cause all this disturbance? How wonderfully sound your friends seem to sleep!" and glancing round at the other beds, a smile showed Alec he had not much to fear.

"Oh! they're not sleeping, sir, but it's nothing



now, only I wanted to give it to Gordon for emptying a jug of water into my bed, and you came up and stopped me."

"I didn't do it," muttered Gordon.

"Then you'd a hand in it, and you're a greater sneak than ever to deny it. Look here, if you tell who did it, I'll give you as jolly a licking as you ever had, and I'm sure the fellow you tell of will, too, at least if he doesn't I'll ——"

"Come, come, Devlin," said the master, keeping his countenance with difficulty, "this will never do; fighting is quite against rules. You've been badly treated, and no doubt Gordon knows all about it; we'll put him on trial to-morrow. Now then, pull on your trousers and come down to my room until the housekeeper sees about your bed."

Alec did as he was told, and presently was snugly seated by a comfortable fire, when the matron brought him a glass of wine and water, and laughing, told him he would not have any

more tricks played upon him after the decided way he had behaved.

And she was right. Next day after morning school, when they were all in the playground, a boy who slept in his room came up to him and held out his hand, saying,

"I threw the water into your bed, Devlin, and I'm sorry for it ; you're a regular brick, and I'll stand your friend before the whole school."

Then followed the rest of the boys, all wanting to shake hands and offering their friendship, and, at last, even Gordon came forward and said,

"I'm sorry, too, Devlin, but you were so mad at a fellow and pulled so hard, I thought you'd murder me. Besides, we all thought you so soft, that you took me by surprise. I'll fight you if you want to, but I'd rather shake hands."

This was Alec's first step to popularity, and his first real experience in the world of school.

Once fairly into the routine of study, Alec

worked pretty well, though uncertainly, and by fits and starts ; thus one week he would keep his place in his classes steadily and be up to the mark in every way, the next might begin quite as well, but then some trifle would suddenly upset all ; he would idle his time away, lose places, cut his lessons, get into scrapes, and finish up by being punished.

“ I cannot understand that boy Devlin,” said the Latin master one day. “ He has plenty of head, and can work well, but there’s no depending upon him.”

This unhappily was too true. The great evil in Alec’s character was indecision, and school did not seem to improve his strength of mind. Now one boy held sway over him, then another. In this he was perhaps paying dearly for his popularity, and the *éclat* gained by the bedroom scene.

Well, the holidays came at last, and every boy’s heart was thrilling. Have you ever seen

a school-room the day before breaking-up ? Many of you have, no doubt, and if you were not too much occupied by your own happiness, you will remember in what a widely-different manner the coming release was met ; you will remember how some of the boys went nearly mad with fun and delight, finding it impossible to perform the most ordinary action without a jump, a laugh, or a shout — how others pretended to take it stoically and kept grim, grave faces, out of which looked eyes dancing with joy—and how great chums got together to compare home notes and exchange messages to favourite sisters.

Well, wasn't it a jolly day, and did not the night seem only half a night ! for what between packing and talking, the small hours were in before you closed your eyes, and then, long, long before daylight, "twang" went the gong, in came the servant with candles and boots, and after a preliminary grunt the sensation of waking to an ordinary school day suddenly gave way to

the stupendous fact that you were going home for the holidays and were the happiest fellow in the world.

I know Alec Devlin felt very happy, very wild, and very impatient to get on the way, and that the second-class carriage in which he and six others travelled to London was the centre of attraction and amusement at every station ; that grave old gentleman, and those smart young ladies, whom to look at you would have said concentrated all their thoughts in their chignons and gay dresses, walked up and down by the carriage smiling, and even sometimes nodding to the boys, and thinking of other dear glad faces they had seen or would see soon.

At last the train began to get broken-winded, and after a struggle for breath and a tremendous effort to draw the carriages into Victoria Station, there they were ! Hard by the platform with its line of cabs, hansoms and eager drivers, rugs, coats, and bags were seized, good-byes said, and out

scrambled seven boys, Home for the Holidays ! of course to be caught by the neck or arm, and kissed or shaken hands with by clustering children, proud mothers, or patronising elder brothers.

Madge and the little ones were there, but not quite certain whether Alec would think such an enthusiastic welcome as he was sure to meet, manly, she had drawn rather back. Alec's heart was stronger than his personal dignity, for catching sight of Madge's pretty face, he dashed through the crowd and threw his arms round her neck. Next came the small ones, all three at once. Next came "Whisky," a Scotch terrier, the only pet except the canary, saved from the old home.

After the kissing, Alec ran off for a cab, saying, "Now then, Madge, keep the young ones together. Hallo, there's Austin ! good-bye, old fellow !" A fair handsome boy nodded and walked to a carriage in which a lady was waiting, seemingly thinking much more of a pug-dog

she was nursing than of her son. Presently back came Alec, dragging another boy after him, no less a person than the hero of the damp bed, Hugh Dorset. "Come along, Hugh, this is my sister Madge, and we are going your way, and can easily drop you. You see, Madge, they've mistaken the train, Hugh's people I mean, so there's no one to meet him. Now then, get in, that's it :—Fire away, cabby."

And off they rattled, talking, laughing, and supremely happy.

However, a surprise was in store for them on reaching Hugh's home. The house had a strange deserted look, blinds down, shutters closed, straw littered about ! Madge saw the boy's cheeks grow deadly pale, as trying to smile and thank them for the lift, he got out. She saw too—what he had not—a placard "To Let" stuck in one of the upper windows, so getting out she stood beside Hugh on the steps. "We had better wait," she whispered ; then the door opened, and a dirty old

charwoman stood there. Hugh could not speak. He looked at Madge with a dumb appeal, and she asked the necessary questions.

"The family had left that morning. They did not leave an address. Letters were to go to Mr. Dorset's office. Yes, there was a letter for the young gentleman, if he came."

This letter Madge handed to Hugh, who stood perfectly still and apparently overwhelmed by surprise and alarm. The sight of his mother's writing, however, broke the spell; tearing the envelope open he read a few hasty loving lines, telling him that the failure of a house in Glasgow had so affected his father's credit, that he had immediately to leave England, that they would be in France when he got the letter, and that he had better go to his aunt until he could join them. Hugh tried to take his disappointment bravely, but his lip quivered and tears came into his eyes. Some of us have met with sore disappointments, so can understand what Hugh suf-



ferred during those few minutes, and until Madge, laying her hand upon his arm, said—

“You must come with us to-night, and sleep with Alec. How lucky he thought of giving you a lift! We shall have such a nice evening, for Alec and you will tell us all your school stories, then to-morrow you can see your aunt and hear when you go home. It is only a delay, you see, of a day or two.”

It is written that there is no word so precious as that spoken in season, and cannot we all add our experience to the wise king's, do not we all remember how some lowering cloud, or stinging pain suddenly cleared away and grew bearable, just because a few kindly, sensible words had been spoken, words that lifted the veil from our eyes and taught us to see the real truth? Hugh's face brightened as he listened, then Alec, catching his clue from Madge, called out, “Jump in again, old fellow; won't we have a jolly night! Come along, Queen Mab” (this was a pet name

for Madge he indulged in sometimes) ; " you are getting more like your namesake than ever, you've bewitched Hugh."

" Queen Mab wasn't a witch, Alec," said Willy, gravely.

" Wasn't she ? then she should have been, Bill, because Madge is a witch and a fairy too, and if I wanted to fly up to the moon, I'd just say to her, ' Lend me your broomstick, your gracious majesty,' and then bang, whiz ! up I'd go. Hi ! what's he stopping for ? Oh ! it's home, is it ? so it is, and there's Nelly half out of the window, and the mother. All right, Nell. Here we are again ! How are you all ?"

I suppose I need not tell you how they laughed, and talked, and told stories, the girls giving experiences of furnishing and housekeeping, which though by no means laughable when suffered, were very funny and caused great laughter when detailed and described in an amusing way, the boys telling school stories, amongst which

figured the "cold water cure," as Alec's wet bed had been christened. So the night wore on, and at last Tommy, whose eyes had shut of their own accord and in spite of all efforts to keep them open, consented to be carried to bed, the others followed, and at last the house was quiet. Madge only seemed to be up, she, according to custom, was remaining after all the others had retired, to have a little uninterrupted time for reading, when in stole Alec, and came softly up to her.

"I heard poor old Hugh sob," he whispered, "but I made him believe I didn't, and came away just to let him have it out and go to sleep; wasn't it hard lines for him, poor fellow, and he bore it so well! But I won't disturb you, Madge," he added, and taking up a book that lay on the table, he soon got so interested in it that he quite forgot to tell Madge of the scrapes he had got into at school, as he intended doing, and long before they had put away their books, Hugh was asleep.



## CHAPTER IV.

### ALEC'S SCHOOL FRIEND.

**D**IRECTLY after breakfast the boys set out for Hampstead, where Hugh's aunt (Lady Mary Ker) lived. His reception was by no means a warm one. Her Ladyship looked as cross as possible, and scolded him roundly for not coming straight to her the previous day, thereby causing her not only anxiety, but the trouble of sending to his late home to inquire about him. Having lectured Hugh, and abused his father, for nearly a quarter of an hour, without any apparent feeling of pity for the evident distress of the poor boy,

she got up, looked at her watch, rang the bell, and ordered the brougham ; then, holding out three fingers for Hugh to shake, said, " You can go now—I've an engagement, but I shall expect you at eleven to-morrow." She only nodded to Alec, who had been listening in the most uncomfortable and indignant frame of mind, thinking if all people with titles to their names spoke so unfeelingly and crossly, that after all it was no loss not to be able to count any amongst his kindred.

Poor Hugh, well as he knew his aunt's peculiar temper, was utterly confused and pained by her manner of speech and treatment ; he did not seem to understand what he was about until they were in the street, when a fit of noisy laughter from Alec roused him, and brought a look into his face, which Alec, mistaking for anger at hearing his aunt laughed at, answered by apologising.

" Oh, there's no need, she's only my grand-aunt after all, and has never liked me since I was

quite young, and finding her best wig, I put it on, and walked gravely into the drawing-room, where she had a reception. No one would have found out the real joke, I being too frightened of my aunt to betray the owner of my head-gear, but she let it out herself, by dashing across the room, and, calling me all manner of names, seized her wig, and carried it off, leaving the whole of her friends laughing. I suppose she has never forgiven me. I hope I won't have to stay long with her ; it will be the hardest lines of all if I have. I suppose, though, she was right ; I ought to have gone straight there yesterday, but I had not courage, you all looked so homelike, and I knew what my aunt was ; to-morrow I'll take my box with me."

This, however, Alec declared should not be, adding he was quite sure Madge would not let Hugh go to be bullied by his aunt. Hugh said no more, though mentally he decided upon taking his own way, and braving his aunt's temper ;

indeed, now that he was away from her, and had time to collect his ideas, his own temper began to assert itself, and a strong desire to face out and answer his aunt's accusations, especially those he recognised as unreasonable and only the result of prejudice, sprang up long before their walk was over. Hugh's eyes were glistening and cheeks burning with eager impatience to meet his angry and unjust aunt, and bitter self-reproach against his own silly weakness in not speaking up at first.

I think Hugh's temper was in reality a young edition of Lady Mary's; his, as yet, taking note only of the warm impulsive kindly view of life and its trials,—hers, from that long experience of the falseness and emptiness which age gives to many, looking suspiciously and bitterly upon every action or individual.

Next morning Lady Mary's servant arrived with a letter from Hugh's father and a message to say that her Ladyship would not expect her

nephew until next day, having a great deal of business to occupy her time.

Hugh took his letter into the bedroom and shut the door : nor did he appear until dinner-time, when meeting Madge in the hall, he said—

“You must not mind me being rather dull ; I have had very bad news from my father : he has lost everything.”

Madge took Hugh's hand. “Poor fellow ! I know what you feel, only try to think as I tried when we had the same to bear—that it was all for the best. You are old enough to get something to do—poor Alec was not.”

It was rather a sad and dull day for them all. No one was exactly sorry when night and bedtime came. I do not think poor Hugh slept much ; at all events his eyes looked dark and heavy next morning, and he carefully avoided all mention of himself or his affairs until after breakfast, when he asked Alec to go with him to Hampstead.



Lady Mary was in the drawing-room, up to her elbows in papers of all sizes and ages, most of them resembling law documents, some closely-written manuscripts and diaries. She received Hugh in a much kinder fashion, and shook hands with Alec, telling him she was glad to see him and hoped he and Hugh would remain friends.

“You got your father’s letter,” she said rather sharply, looking at her nephew. “It only verifies what I expected and predicted ; but there, you are not to blame. You are to remain with me, and I am to find employment for you ; your father says as much in his letter, and I mean to do it, but in my own way. Your mother, my niece, chose to marry into trade ; I call all people who buy and sell, tradesmen ; so neither she nor your father can object to you gaining a living in the same way. I am going to apprentice you to the upholstery business ; the master of a shop in Tottenham-court Road—a very

honest clever man—has agreed to take you, and, if you behave yourself, keep you.”

Hugh’s face had grown crimson as he listened to his aunt’s extraordinary announcements, but his eyes never left hers, and for a few seconds after she had done speaking, the two sat looking at each other ; gradually Hugh’s cheeks grew very pale, he got up, walked straight across the room to Lady Mary and kissed her, then drawing himself up, and standing fronting her, he said—

“I’ll do what you advise, Aunt Mary, but it’s not altogether to please you, or because I would not rather take gentleman’s work, but to show you that I can work, and will some day make you respect what you call a tradesman, for my poor father’s sake.”

Lady Mary and Hugh were very like each other at that moment, both faces lighted up and earnest ; liker still when the old lady, holding out her hand, said—

“ You are a brave boy, nephew ; see that you act up to your principle ; you will have hard and rough work, but it’s the rough roads that show endurance, and prove what men are made of. Now, take your friend down to the dining-room, and give him some lunch. I shall be busy for a couple of hours.”

Alec returned home brimful of news and indignation. He had lost all admiration for people with “ handles to their names,” and gave it as his opinion that Lady Mary, in spite of her name, could not be a gentlewoman, or she would not have made Hugh become a common workman ; at which Madge laughed.

Looking at Lady Mary’s conduct by the explanation given by Alec, her conduct certainly did seem unnecessarily harsh, and even more than eccentric, and Madge was quite prepared to take Hugh’s part, even if he disobeyed his aunt, and chose some more agreeable work. Nor was it until Sunday, when Hugh him-

self appeared, that her prejudices were removed.

We all know that there are two ways of telling a story ; that, though the main points may be strictly kept, and almost even the minor expressions used, the same tale, told by two differently influenced persons, will bear a completely different signification. So it was that when Hugh had told his own story, Madge was more inclined to admire and like Lady Mary than to blame her, and certainly quite agreed with Hugh that he was right in falling in with her wishes.

“I did not like the notion at first,” he said ; “I fancied myself too fine a gentleman to work with my hands, but when I got into the workshop, and saw what clever, fine fellows the men were, I felt I had been a stupid, conceited donkey, so put my pride away until I had won a right to wear it. My aunt came to the workshop the other day, expecting, I believe, to find me shirk-

ing, but I was just learning to plane wood, and happened to be working so hard that I never saw her until she was close behind, and nearly made me smash the plane by saying, 'Glad to see you in earnest, nephew Hugh. Your master has given you a half-holiday, so you can wipe your face, and put on your jacket.' I was following her, when she turned and put a sovereign in my hand, whispering, 'In Scotland, workmen have a fashion called paying a footing; now, you give that to one of the men, and tell them to drink your aunt Lady Mary Ker's health.' I did what she told me, looking almost as astonished and confused as the man who took my message and the money. I really thought, and I am sure he did, that the old lady was chaffing us all. I got awfully joked about it next day, and the harder I work the more they chaff me."

Hugh was, you see, evidently taking to his work in a kindly, hopeful way, and already

reaping the benefit and comfort of falling in with his aunt's freak—for that it was more than a freak to try Hugh's disposition, Madge, in her greater wisdom, deemed improbable. Hugh, however, took or seemed to take it all in earnest ; so Madge kept her opinion to herself, but felt a great curiosity to see this wonderful aunt.

When Alec came in he was delighted to find Hugh there, though the notion of trade and the workshop was evidently a sore point—one, too, he was at great pains to avoid any allusion to. Alec, you must know, had just met Fred Austin, and lately having been a good deal in that young gentleman's company, had, as usual, suffered from the influence. Fred's people were very rich ; he had been taught that money was the key to everything, and that to have lots of money, a grand house, carriages, and servants was the mark and attribute of greatness and happiness. When he saw what a small house Alec's mother lived in he was rather

scandalised ; but then, remembering to have heard Alec speaking of entailed property (poor Alec was a little given to boasting), he consulted his mother, who explained as well as she could the law of entail, and how, when properties are entailed upon the elder son, the rest of the family, and even the heir, may for a certain time have very little to live upon. This satisfied Fred, who really liking Hugh, persuaded his mother to go and call upon Mrs. Devlin. Accordingly, one afternoon a magnificent open carriage, with high-stepping bay horses, coachman and footman powdered and silver-laced, pulled up opposite the little house. Down came the footman, and nearly wrenched off the brass knocker in his effort to give a correct "rat, tat, tat."

Bridget answered, presently appearing in Mrs. Devlin's bedroom carrying a highly glazed card, and saying, "Sure, mam, the flunkey sint me to ax av ye were at home ; fax an av ye weren't, how could I ax ye ?" .

Mrs. Devlin at once recognised the name of the mother of Alec's friend, and telling Bridget to take the visitor into the drawing-room, put on another cap, wrapped a large Indian shawl round her, and just looking into the nursery to warn Nelly to keep the children quiet, went downstairs.

Mrs. Austin's silk dress very nearly covered the carpet of the small room, and quite hid the sofa upon which she had seated herself. She was a very fine lady in her own estimation, and like all pretentious people, very vulgar in reality. Already she had half-repented her own condescension in coming to call upon people who lived in such a house, and were content with rooms such as her servants would have objected to, therefore she determined to let Mrs. Devlin understand the great honour conferred, and to accomplish this, began running over a list of her engagements, complaining of the many calls upon women in her position, and asking poor delicate Mrs. Devlin whether she was going to Lady So-



and-So's *fête*, or Lord somebody else's ball, rattling on so incessantly and in such a loud tone of voice, that her listener grew perfectly bewildered, and was on the point of ringing to send for one of the girls, when Bridget, opening the door, announced "Lady Mary Ker."

In walked Hugh's aunt straight up to Mrs. Devlin, holding out her hand, and saying in a low, kind voice, which fell so softly after Mrs. Austin's acclamations,

"Don't rise, I know you're an invalid, and I am quite ashamed of myself for not calling sooner to tell you how very grateful I am for your kindness to Hugh." Lady Mary had talked herself into a chair close to Mrs. Devlin, and facing Mrs. Austin, of whom she now took a cool and complete survey, from the flowers at the top of her head, to the sweeping train of her silk dress, all the while listening to Mrs. Devlin, who took the opportunity of a partial introduction, acknowledged by a stiff bow by Lady Mary,—

an introduction which gave Mrs. Austin an excuse to strike in and tell Lady Mary how fond Fred was of Hugh, to which Lady Mary gave the shortest of answers, turning to Mrs. Devlin, saying,

“My brother has been in town this week, and Hugh and I thought we would ask him for the Duchess’s family pass to the Botanical Gardens. You are so near that you will often be able to use it, and as one of the girls is ill and obliged to remain abroad, they will not come to town this year, at least to make any stay, so you will have the full use of their subscription for yourself and children. No, don’t thank me, it was all Hugh, he is the most thoughtful boy in the world; only think of his getting up at daylight yesterday, and marching off to Billingsgate to bring me some fresh herrings for breakfast, just because he had heard me saying I would like one!”

Lady Mary took all the conversation now upon herself, hoping thereby to disgust Mrs. Austin into leaving, but seeing no chance of accom-

plishing this, she proposed driving Mrs. Devlin round the park, saying, with a gracious smile and a polite bow to Mrs. Austin, "I am sure you will excuse my rudeness in shortening your visit, but I think the soft air we have to-day will do Mrs. Devlin good."

Mrs. Austin could do nothing but protest being in the way, and after a most affectionate farewell and offer of her carriage at any time, took her departure.

When she was gone, Lady Mary made a comical face.

"Does that lady call upon you often, Mrs. Devlin? Ah! only her first visit! Then don't be at home again; her voice is enough to shatter your nerves, I heard it rasping all the way in the street; no wonder you looked so pale. Now then, lie quietly down and I'll sit here and talk. We can drive any day, you are evidently too much knocked up to attempt it, although I could not think of anything else to get quit of her.

Now then, I want you to take me for a friend. I seldom make new acquaintances, and people don't generally like me, but I have heard so much of your family that I mean to break my rule. I want, too, to see your daughter Madge. Jack Hay is my cousin's son, and I was delighted with all he told me of Madge. I heard the story of the canary, too ; that was just like a Hay. They are all the same, tender-hearted, daring to a fault, and true as steel. Jack's father lost his arm trying to save a poor little wounded drummer-boy of his company. His grandfather was trampled to death stopping a pair of runaway horses. I am very proud of being a Hay by my dead mother's side.

"Yes," repeated Lady Mary, nodding her head vehemently to emphasise her words, "I am proud of being a Hay. I get all my bad and queer tempers from the other side of the house. You know they call us the mad Belfords. I suppose you join with all the rest in thinking I have done an eccentric thing in putting Hugh

into a workshop to learn his trade. All my friends abuse me ; his father even wrote a most impertinent letter, threatening me with all sorts of law, just as if I had kidnapped the young monkey. I have my own plans for Master Hugh. His mother was a pet of mine, and a sensible girl until she met that man Dorset ; a clever mother makes a clever son. Hugh only wanted bringing out ; his father's failure will be his making. A man must work either with his brain or his hands. Hugh will use both, one will help the other. A man raises his work to his proper level ; if he is a gentleman, his work becomes gentleman's work ; if he is a snob, he may rise to become Prime Minister, and yet carry his snobism with him. My dear father's often-repeated motto was, 'Fear God, honour the King, and whatever your hands find to do, do well.' Hugh has nothing to look for by right but what he makes for himself, and with God's grace the lad will be a good and great man.

You will tire of me and my plans, Mrs. Devlin ; I am very selfish, but it is pleasant to have a good listener, and I wanted to see your daughter ; however, you will, I hope, let her spend Thursday with me ; I'll send for her at twelve."

Mrs. Devlin had a great deal to tell Madge when she returned from her shopping expedition. Alec was evidently gratified at the meeting of the two visitors, for in spite of the indignation with which he had regarded Lady Mary's conduct to Hugh, the old weakness for people with "handles to their names" had been stealing back, especially since he had been taken up by the Austins. I suppose most of you have read the old copy-book heading of "Evil communications corrupt good manners," though comparatively few have thought of bringing it to bear upon every-day experience and life.

Poor Alec was just at this period of our history in great danger of letting his new com-

panion's influence, and home ways overrule what good Darkton life had wrought in him, so it was with a great sense of relief Madge saw him start for Haythorp, there to spend a fortnight, at least, out of his Christmas six weeks.

You will have understood by this time what a good daughter and sister Madge was, and how, in consequence of Mrs. Devlin's ill-health, she became almost like a mother in the sight and love of her younger brothers and sisters, while in her mother's eyes she was a treasure beyond all price. Nor was her gentle influence confined to the members of her own family ; just as you will see if you fling a pebble into a pool of water a circle of tiny waves spreading and encircling until they reach the shore, so do kindness, love, and truth spread their spell and charm in a still widening, ever-enlarging radius. "Charity," says the proverb, "begins at home," but we all know it cannot be true charity if it ends there.

Madge's influence was felt, and her name beloved, by every one who had any dealings with the Devlins. Even the poor little smoke-begrimed sparrows seemed to perk up and twitter when Madge's hand distributed their morning portion of crumbs ; and a poor lonely toad in the back-garden grew so fond of her, that directly he heard her voice he would hop out of the hole in the wall, which served as his habitation, and look plaintively up with his wonderful eyes, until his crust of bread appeared in her hand. Toads are rather funny pets, are they not ? I once had one, and my friends used to laugh at my taste, but I assure you, Peter, as I called him, grew quite affectionate, and when he died, I missed him greatly, perhaps the more so, because no one seemed to appreciate his good qualities but myself.

The care of a house and the necessary duty of purse-keeper had been a great trial at first, but Madge was one of those who always faced a



difficulty. She knew if she did not undertake the management, no one else could, and that it would be impossible to live in a house of their own. Nelly was a capital lieutenant, and managed the nursery very well, giving a due amount of education, and keeping up a constant state of content and good-humour—a by no means easy task amongst country-bred children, suddenly moved from the garden and green fields to a London home. Bridget, too, had become invaluable, and well was it Madge had found a key to the girl's better nature, as in a small family, where economy is necessary, an honest servant *is* invaluable.

Furnishing the house had taken nearly all Mrs. Devlin's ready money. Alec's school-bill and expenses swallowed up what remained, so it was an anxious time when Christmas bills came, and Alec's clothes required not only mending, but replenishing. Like most boys, he had not the slightest notion of the value of any-

thing in a monetary sense : jackets, trousers, shirts, and shoes were necessary things, made to wear and wear out, too.

The night before he went to Haythorp he ran over a list of clothing he supposed he would want to take back to Durkton. There would be football, "all the fellows" had flannel trousers ; then would come cricket, &c., all requiring special garments.

Poor Madge laid down her pencil, with which she had been making a list, in despair.

"Won't one pair of white flannel trousers do?" she asked.

"All the fellows have two at least, but I dare say I can make one pair do, so there ; now then, I'll want money to pay my sub. to the football, gym., and cricket-club. There, old woman, don't look so shocked ; if you send a fellow to a swell school you must let him do things like other fellows. I'll tell you what, if Colonel Hay tips me, I'll keep it for subs."

Madge quite appreciated this magnanimous self-denial, and kissing Alec, ordered him off to bed, telling him he should have everything necessary.





## CHAPTER V.

### GOOD AND BAD FRIENDS.

**I**T was the end of January before the Hays would let Alec return home, so that one week only of his holidays remained. In some ways the visit had not improved him; he had been humoured a great deal, the other boys had given in to him, and relinquished their own pleasures to give him gratification; so, as you have known all along, Alec being easily influenced, and having a very great opinion of himself and his merits, came back to London, expecting to meet the same consideration, and feel himself of as much im-

portance as he had done at Haythorp. This did not show itself the first night ; happy and delightful in every sense as his visit had been, he was still happier that first night at home, as he sat with his arm round his mother recounting all he had seen and done at Haythorp, and watching the excited glowing faces of the children, and in his turn listening to their Christmas doings ; how Lady Mary Ker had brought them a tree, and sent a great basket full of things to put on it ; and how Hugh had come and dressed up little Tommy like old Father Christmas.

Hugh seemed to be quite a hero with the nursery people, having won their hearts by presents of boats, bits of wood, nails, and such like, together with a box of tools, so that they were all, boys and girls alike, amateur carpenters. Indeed, so enthusiastic was the worship given to Hugh, and so often was his name quoted, that Alec began to grow jealous. Mentally he resolved upon making extensive purchases in

the way of toys next morning, a resolution which, like many we make at night, did not stand the sunlight, and was utterly forgotten by the time breakfast was over.

It was at breakfast Alec announced his intention of going to the Drury-lane pantomime.

The children opened their eyes and stopped eating, then burst forth in a general appeal.

"Oh Madge, let us go, too ; I want to see the man in checked clothes with the black face." "I want to hear the clown." "I want to go because Alec is going."

Madge put her hands to her ears, and laughed, "There, there, you need not make me deaf because you want to see a lot of silly people making geese of themselves. I can dress you in checked clothes, Charley, and black your face, and if I make a spotted jacket and knickerbockers for Nelly she will say far funnier things than the clown."

"But she cannot turn heels over head," observed Johnny, decidedly.

“Then you can for her. You shall be second clown and tumble about, while Nelly says all the funny things, and we’ll get Hugh to come, and have a pantomime at home.” So Madge turned their attention from the theatre, and sent them off, all anticipation and delight, to plan out how they were to have a pantomime of their own. Meanwhile, Alec, who had gone to his room to get ready for a call upon Fred Austin, rushed down carrying a formidable brown paper parcel, which he laid before Madge. “I forgot this last night. Mrs. Hay sent it you, with her love of course.” The children had caught sight of the package, and came crowding down.

Great and general was the excitement; even Madge’s cheeks looked redder as she untied the string, unfolded the cover and at last displayed to their delighted eyes a large Indian inlaid workbox.

“Oh jolly,” cried Alec, “that’s from Jack—he

sent a box of skins and things home just before I left—fancy him remembering you, Madge.”

“Everybody remembers Madge, and so they should,” and Nelly kissed her sister, looking as she did so half angrily at Alec, who responded hotly—

“Well, who said they didn’t? don’t you think I love Madge as well as you do, or as Jack does either, though he is a rich fellow, and can buy her fine presents? Wait till I go to India, I’ll send her something quite as good, if that will make you believe I love her.”

“Don’t be silly, Alec,” laughed Madge; “Nelly is only joking; but isn’t it lovely?”

It was opened now, and inside lay a note from Jack, saying he hoped Madge would like the box, and think sometimes of happy old times when she was using it.

Madge was so busy reading this little note that she had taken no notice of what else the box contained, until exclamations of astonishment



and delight brought back her attention, and then she saw that it was thoroughly stocked with everything required for sewing; a little tray was filled with scissors, knife, bodkin, &c., and upon raising this, behold! embedded in cotton wool, lay a beautiful little watch, with a long gold chain curling round and round, and a slip of paper, upon which was written "To Madge, from Jack Hay's mother." The sight of the watch elicited such a shout of delight from Tommy, that Mrs. Devlin appeared in her dressing-gown, to be quite as much astonished and delighted as her children were.

The box and its fittings were perfect, everything just as good and proper as it could be, and evidently selected by some one who knew from experience the arts both of making and mending. There was a place for everything, and everything in its place. Even the watch lay in its snug nest of cotton-wool as Tommy said, "Just like a live thing in its nest."

“Won’t she stir you up in the morning, now,” laughed Alec. “There’ll be no kitchen clock going wrong ; Madge’s watch will always keep sharp time. Now, then, good day ladies and gentlemen, I’m off to Charlestown ; at any rate, Regent’s Park, and won’t be home until you see me.”

So saying, Alec kissed his mother and went off, feeling just as if he had given Madge the box and watch, and congratulating himself with the thought that now she would not say anything against the expense of his going to the pantomime if the Austins asked him.

The box, with its supply of materials, had come at the right moment. There was plenty of work to be done to Alec’s clothing, so much that, after a thorough investigation, Madge decided help would be necessary, and sent Nelly and the children off to engage a poor sewing girl they knew of, to come next day. Meanwhile, Madge set heartily to work, and got

through more than ever she had done before, which may perhaps have been attributable to the work-box, which, as Jack Hay's present, brought back many memories of happy days at the old house.

The box stood upon a little round work-table, in one of the windows of the drawing-room, looking very bright and pretty, quite a refreshing thing to look at. Every time a new thread or button was wanted, besides the pleasure of hunting through the many nooks and corners for what was wanted, or to see if there was a smaller sized button or finer thread, there was the delight of coming upon some as yet unnoticed or forgotten treasure, displaying anew Mrs. Hay's forethought. The greatest surprise of all, however, was to come, and came just as Jack had hoped it would, when Madge was alone and wanted something to cheer her after the long hours of work.

They were all in bed, she was still darning

away, with the candles burnt nearly to their sockets, and a big shawl round her to make up for the fire having been allowed to go out. The socks were finished at last, lying side by side upon the table. Madge pulled up a little side wedge looking compartment in the upper tray of the box, thinking it was the needle-book out of which she had taken the darning needle ; up came, not a needle but a note-book, which had somehow escaped observation, and from it fell out a photo of Jack Hay.

There he was, looking straight up in her face with the same cheering, hopeful smile, the same honest, fearless expression, only just a little more manly and serious, and with a darker line along the upper lip. He had on his uniform, perhaps it was that made him look so handsome, at least Madge tried to think so, telling herself she had never thought of Jack as even good-looking before.

In the note-book there was a slip of paper, on

which Jack had written and blotted terribly the short sentence—

“Don’t stitch your eyes out, dear Madge, until I have had another look at them.”

I do not know what time Madge went to bed. I am afraid it was very much more like morning than night, still when she came into her mother’s room, carrying the little tray with a cup of tea and toast, she looked so bright and happy that even her mother remarked it, and half sighing said—

“Well, Madge, you were the only one that set yourself against our coming to London, and now you are the healthiest and happiest of us all! I feel dreadfully weak this morning; poor Alec talked so much last night, I think he upset me. Did he tell you of the offer Colonel Hay made him? No? he told me, after we came upstairs, Angus Hay is going to learn civil engineering, and to be boarded with some relation in India. It seems that in India, boys after one

year's study draw pay sufficient to live upon, and Colonel Hay told Alec to ask my consent to his going out with Angus in two years ; that if I consented, he would advance the premium, and let Alec repay him by degrees, when he was able."

"Does Alec like it?"

"Yes, of course he does ; he and Angus are great friends ; he will have a life full of adventure in India, and it will only cost me his journey out, after which, he will be almost directly able to live upon his own pay. People make lots of money as civil engineers now, although I remember it being a wretched profession and one no gentleman would take ; things are so changed now, gentlemen seem to do anything in the working way, and women try to take what used to be their special employments from them ; certainly the world is in a strange state. I hope you will never try to be a strong-minded woman, Madge."

“I have no time to be one, mother, dear. I think if some of these strong-minded women had as many stockings to darn as I have, they would not want more to do. They always put me in mind of a saying of Lady Mary’s, ‘Neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red herring.’ They have none of the comfort and glory of a good man’s wife, and miss all the blessings of home which seem to me woman’s world.”

After which little speech, colouring deeply at her own enthusiasm, Madge carried away the empty cup, and was soon very busy with true “woman’s work,” namely taking care to secure the comfort and welfare of those God had given her to love and help.

The work-girl came nearly an hour-and-a-half sooner than she was expected ; there was a bare cupboard in her little garret, and she was glad enough to give her extra time for the chance of a cup of tea from the servant’s breakfast. Madge was equally glad to see her ; so after

securing her a good breakfast, installed her by her bedroom fire, beside a table, upon which Alec's flannel shirts lay in a formidable bundle. Madge had put the work-girl in her own room. for two very good reasons, one being, that she could then superintend, and if necessary, work too ;—the other, the fact that Bridget was so fond of talking, that there would be small chance of much work being accomplished. You see what a wise head care for others had put upon Madge's young shoulders. Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention. When necessity comes to urge on a loving true heart, you would be surprised to see the powers of invention which find birth and scope.

While they were all at breakfast Alec told them he had been invited to go to the theatre with the Austins, who were to call for him on their way. The letter from Fred did not say what theatre, but that was not of great importance. Alec was delighted, and in such a good



humour that he volunteered taking the children to the Kensington Museum, where, however, they saw nothing beyond that portion where you find naval medals, armour, and guns, that being Alec's favourite study.

When evening came, you may be sure our young hero did not spare any time or trouble in making himself look smart ; there was a stiff lock of hair which would always turn either the wrong way, or stand straight up, proving a great trial of temper, until Nelly suggested the use of something she had seen Bridget using, and which, being applied to the unruly lock, at once settled it in proper form. Then there was some trouble as to a white tie, finally overcome by cutting one of his father's in half. All and each of these little events caused pleasant excitement amongst the children, who kept the nursery door open to hear and see as much of Alec's dressing as possible. Everything except a white pocket-handkerchief being complete, down he went to the

dining-room, where they were now having tea, to ask a loan of one from Madge. "You'll find one in the dressing-table drawer," was the ready answer, and Alec went up stairs.

There was a nice fire burning in Madge's room, a table covered with work just as the girl had left it, when Bridget called her to the kitchen to have her supper. Upon the dressing-table lay Madge's new watch, the chain glittering prettily in the firelight. Alec took it up and looked more closely at it. It was certainly a very nice watch to look at, and in reality a very good and valuable one; he did not remember to have seen any of the Durkton boys with a watch like it, and thought how proud he should be to have one. So just to see how nice the pretty chain would look, Alec put the watch in his waistcoat pocket. Didn't it glitter and gleam in the flickering fire-light!

"Please tell me the time, sir," said Alec, pretending to be some one else; then pulling out

the watch with a flourish to answer, "a quarter-past seven." Quite time to start for the theatre, he thought, putting the watch back into his pocket. Perhaps Madge would lend it to him just for one night to astonish Fred Austin. Yes, he would go and ask her. So down stairs he ran, peeped into the drawing-room, then the dining-room, but Madge was not to be seen, and before he found her the Austins' carriage rattled up; the footman gave a thundering knock, to prove, as he told Alec, that "there was not a hinstant to spare." Watch, chain and Madge were all forgotten, until the bright lights at the theatre flashed on the chain, and Fred Austin said—

"Hullo, old fellow; what a swell you've turned out to-night!"

Alec blushed, and felt very uncomfortable, dreading the next question, but Fred's attention was turned to the stage, and nothing further happened to remind Alec of what he had in

his pocket. Indeed, he forgot all about it, until they were in the carriage going home.

He put his hand up to his waistcoat ; chain and watch were gone. From the moment he made this terrible discovery until he reached home, Alec had not the least notion what he was talking about or doing. Even when the carriage had driven off, he stood stupidly staring after it, without attempting to get into the house. Staring and thinking that he had better run away after it into the darkness, and hide himself for ever ; the temptation was strong, and there is no saying but it would have been given way to, had not Madge opened the front door, saying—

“It was so thoughtful of you not to ring in case of waking mama. Come in, dear ; it’s a nasty damp night to be out in. Was the theatre very nice ?”

Alec muttered something about being disappointed, and made a great fuss about hanging

up his cap and over-coat. He dreaded facing Madge in the light, and hearing, as he thought he must do, of the loss. Conscience, you know, makes cowards of us all, and it appeared to Alec that Madge would know at once he had taken and lost her watch. When he did follow her into the sitting-room he kept away from the candles, and did not venture even to glance at her face, but sat down to eat some supper, which was standing on a side-table, every mouthful of which he thought would choke him; nay, in his misery and shame, almost hoped it would.

Much to his relief, Madge did not talk or ask him questions. She seemed vexed, and looked flushed and nervous. Alec saw this as he kissed her to say good night, and scarcely having spoken a word since he came home, went off to bed. There was no sleep, however, for him that night. In vain he shut his eyelids, tried to think he would find the watch in the box at the theatre,

and attempted to sleep. Sleep would not come; all the long night he lay shivering with cold and fear, longing for, yet dreading the morning, making a score of vague plans as to the recovery of the watch, and as many resolutions about his future conduct. Daylight came at last, and as people began to move about in the house, Alec grew more hopeful.





## CHAPTER VI.

### THE LOST WATCH.



WHEN Alec came down to breakfast next morning, Madge was not there. She had, Nelly said, gone off quite early to stop the work-girl coming. Alec did not ask any questions, but somehow he felt this walk of Madge's had something in connection with the watch, and he would have liked very much to ask why the work-girl was to be stopped in such a hurry. This, however, he had not courage to do, so went on eating his bread-and-butter, and giving as short answers as he could to the many questions put to him by the children,

each of whom was eager to learn the fullest particulars relating to the theatre.

Presently Alec pushed his chair back, and got up.

"I am going out," he said, looking at Nelly, "and shall not be back till dark, I dare say."

"Where are you going?"

"Where I please!" snapped Alec, flinging himself out of the room, and slamming the door with a force that made the cups rattle.

"Well," observed Annie, "if the theatre makes people like that, I am sure I don't want ever to go."

"Madge promised he would tell us all about it," sighed Tommy; "I wish I was big enough to sweep a crossing."

"Why, darling?" and as Nelly spoke she tried hard not to smile, for the little boy's face was painfully earnest.

"To get some money to see the pantomime. I want so much to see the man with the patch-



work trousers. I saw his picture, and he was all over patches, and checks, and a black thing over his face, and a long sword, and he stood upon one leg. Oh! I do so wish I was rich."

"So do I," "And I," "And me, too," brought in Charley; then adding, "But Tarly is rich, Tarly got six penny;" and away the little fellow toddled to the sofa, where from under the pillow, he produced a little bag, in which was stored six penny pieces. These he carried to Tommy, and laying them before him said, "Tarly give oo money."

Nelly caught Charley up in her arms, and began dancing round the room, calling him every pet name she could think of; and the others were all jumping after her, when Madge looked in. Nelly was quiet directly.

"You are tired and worried, Madge, dear. What did the girl say?"

"I cannot comprehend her. It almost seems as if I had made a mistake, she looked so sur-

prised and cried so bitterly ; I'd rather have lost twenty watches than have gone to her."

"Then I am right," cried Nelly, who had taken the work-girl's part ; "she did not do it."

But Madge shook her head. She had seen some of Alec's clothes upon the table, taken, the girl said, to mend at night ; but when once suspicion is roused, every little trifle will offer confirmation, and the fact of seeing that the girl had carried work away, helped to strengthen the evidence against her. If she stole one thing why not another ? All Madge said was, "Don't talk of it, Nelly. We must try and forget all about it." So saying, she sat down to get some breakfast, and no one mentioned the subject again.

Meanwhile Alec was walking to the theatre as fast as he could, thinking he would go in and look everywhere, but the doors were closed, and although he waited a long time, he saw no one who seemed to have anything to do with the place, until a policeman, who had been standing

near, watching him, came up, and said, "Are you looking for any one, sir?"

Alec's heart began to beat very fast. "Yes, I lost a watch in the theatre last night, and I want to go in to look for it."

"Lost a watch, did ye? Dear me! Tell me all about it now, and I'll see what can be done."

Alec paused a minute, then told so much of the story as seemed necessary, which was very little, and only amounted to the fact that when he went into the box he had the watch on, and when he was driving home it was gone.

"You are positive sure you had it on?"

"Oh, yes." Poor Alec only wished he had not had such reason to be sure.

The policeman shook his head. "It's a bad job, sir, a very bad job. People oughtn't to go to theatres with watches on at all; it's a tempting Providence, it is. I dare say, now, you thought a deal of that watch?"

Alec nodded. Indeed he did, a very great deal.

“Ay, and there was a crush as you came out of the theatre? Yes. I know’d it. You’ve lost your watch, sir, that’s plain; but come along with me, and you shall lay your complaint before the sitting magistrate all in proper form. There’s nothing like it in our way of life; do everything on the square, have everything ship-shape, and keep your wind in order—for there’s no telling how soon you’ll have to use your fists. If the watch is to be found, the police is the party that will find it.”

Alec’s heart gave a glad bound. He thought the policeman the finest fellow he had ever seen, and paid him homage with his eyes so heartily that the man asked rather sharply,

“Well, young gentleman, do you think you’ll know me again?”

“To be sure I will,” said Alec, sincerely.

“Otherwise,” added the policeman, “it won’t be for want o’ takin’ of my measure. Didn’t you never see a policeman before?”

"Oh yes, lots ; but they were not like you."

"Not like me ! And what were they like, then ? Handsome fellows, I warrant."

"Not so handsome as you," replied Alec, with perfect gravity, and meaning what he said.

"Come, youngster," said the man, who thought Alec was laughing at him, "Come, youngster, none o' your chaff—no one ever chaffed Sam Brown with impunity. 'Nemo me impune lacessit,' that's my motter. I got that out o' a dictionary, I did, and I suppose you know what it means—'Nobody dare meddle with me.'"

"I wasn't chaffing you. I never meant to make you angry," said Alec. "I thought you were like a soldier."

Sam Brown was not impervious to flattery, and Alec was so evidently in earnest, that he began to whistle, killing a broad grin in the bud ; and, drawing himself up, he looked down at Alec out of the corner of his eyes, saying, after a considerable time,

"Oh my ! ain't you a rum young gent !" Then he was silent, until he reached a gloomy-looking building, where policemen were standing about.

Alec followed up a dark, dirty staircase, into the presence of a large, rather stern-looking man, with very bright eyes and a low kind voice. There were about a dozen people in the room, but none of them took the slightest heed while Alec told his story.

"Who were you with ?" asked the magistrate.

"Mr. Austen, sir."

"Do you mean Austen, of Sidney Terrace ?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you are a friend of that young scamp ?" sternly.

"Yes, sir, we are at Durkton together."

The magistrate laughed.

"Oh, then, leave your name, and call on Saturday. I don't give you much hope, but it's just possible the watch may turn up. Good-day."

And Alec found himself in the passage again beside Sam Brown, who said—

“I suppose you don’t know your way home, do you? Well, then, get into this ’ere bus, and it will take you right up to your place; but don’t be practising chaff on all the police; it ain’t a safe game for such a young swell. Good-day, sir, and wish you luck. You did the right thing in coming to the police.”

“He’s a nice little chap, arter all,” said Sam, as he saw Alec clamber up to the knife-board of the omnibus; “but whatever could make him think me good-looking?”





## CHAPTER VII.

### ALEC'S CONFESSION.



WHEN Alec reached home, the first thing he heard was his mother's voice saying,

"Well, Madge, you are the most self-willed child I ever saw. It is perfectly clear the girl has stolen the watch, and it is decidedly your duty to have her punished."

Alec stood upon the door-mat ; what he felt I cannot attempt to describe. It was his first acquaintance with sin, and the sin seemed to follow him every moment. In a perfect agony of suspense he waited to hear Madge's reply. It came



at last, and never, in all his life, did he forget the feeling that rushed over him when she said—

“Mother, I cannot inform against the girl. If I am wrong I must ask God to forgive me, but wrong or right, the watch is lost, and I will do no more.”

Madge began this speech, knowing in the fulness of her heart she was saying what was right, but before she had finished, her courage failed and her voice broke ; then after a look in her mother's face, to see nothing but surprise and indignation, she ran out of the room, thinking, “I cannot make any one understand,” and stumbled right into Alec's arms.

“Let me go, dear,” she said, struggling free ; “you cannot do anything except you persuade mamma that I am not wrong, and that I had better lose my watch than shut a poor girl in prison, and send her crippled sister to the work-house. You look sorry, Alec ; for my sake go and tell mamma.”

Madge kissed him and ran upstairs, little thinking of the wild self-reproach and anguish she had raised in Alec's heart. He would have given anything for strength of mind to follow her and confess his sin, but her very gentleness and mercy towards the innocent girl shut his mouth, for his cowardly conscience whispered, "No one will suffer."

Alec therefore held his peace. He went to the police-station on Saturday, but nothing had been heard of the watch, so that he took his departure for Durkton in a miserable state of suspense and remorse, feeling sure that all would be discovered and that he never should be able to look Madge in the face again—poor Madge, who, he well knew, had been sitting up nearly the whole of two nights stitching away at his clothes!

Alec was not to be envied that day, I assure you, and felt as completely ashamed of himself as he deserved to be.

Most of the boys of the school arrived the day

Alec did, so being a second-term boy, he found himself looked up to as a superior being ; his general conduct and progress during the preceding months had been of a character to satisfy the masters, and lead them to look forward hopefully to the future, and depend upon his influence and example helping younger or newer boys. But remorse and fear were busy at Alec's heart. He had lost self-respect, and grew, day after day, more reckless and careless, getting into one scrape after another, until the masters, after reasoning kindly with him, threatened to send him home.

Things were in this state when a letter from Jack Hay reached him, the first since Jack had gone to India ; it contained a long description of the life there, both soldiering and shooting, hunting in the jungle, the number of tigers he had seen and shot, or had a share in shooting. Then he wrote of the old days at Poffington, and said—  
“ Your sister gave me a Bible when I came away ;

tell her I read it every day, and that I often keep out of scrapes by thinking of her, and how vexed her dear face would look if she saw me. Take my advice, old boy, go to Madge whenever you are ashamed of anything you've done; she will never be so hard to deal with as your own conscience will be; and if you only remember you mean to make a clean breast to her, you'll never do very wrong."

Alec's tears fell fast upon the words as he read—words which seemed to have come to show him the way out of his trouble, and strengthen him to do what in his heart he knew was the right thing. That very day he wrote to Madge, telling her the whole story, how wretched he had been, that everything had gone wrong with him since he had been so wicked, and that Jack's letter had come like a message of peace. Both letters were blotched with repentant tears, but Alec had made up his mind, and knew Madge would understand him.

Directly the envelope was sealed and put into the letter-box he felt happier. A load seemed lifted from his heart, and, for the first time since the night he lost the watch, he knelt down and said his prayers. Next morning he felt a different boy. The terrible sense of concealment and falseness was gone ; he could hold up his head and look other fellows in the face ; he was not afraid of hearing his own voice, or that every time the master came near him he was to be called up to the principal to hear that his sin had been discovered. This was all changed, and that very day he took his old place at the top of his class, and did so well that the masters wondered what new freak had come over him, or what mischief he had been up to that he should take such pains to propitiate them.

I suppose you have no doubt as to what kind of answer Alec received from Madge, and that if it were possible, he loved her for her dear gentle words of pity and encouragement more than ever

"She had gone," she told him, "to the work-girl directly, and told her everything about the loss of the watch."

From that day Alec was a different boy, working with such good-will, that when Midsummer drew near he was one of the first in the list of competitors for several prizes. One prize in particular he had set his heart upon gaining—a prize given for general good conduct and progress—and it soon became evident that the choice would lie between Fred Austen and himself. Both were popular, but amongst very different sets of boys.

Boys will take leaders, and those who were led by Fred soon began to sneer at Alec's friends. But the worst was to come. About ten days before the holidays were to begin, Alec, on joining his class in the morning, saw a decided change in the manner of the boys. First one, then another, turned away; when class-time came, way was made for him, and not a look or word

given. Fred Austen was in his place, and in return to Alec's nod and "Good-morning," only turned his face away, but grew paler as he did so.

Alec's heart beat heavily ; he knew that something dreadful had happened, and the only thing he could think of was the fault and sin concerning the watch. Although the confession, and Madge's letter, had relieved his conscience and restored his self-respect, he had never really forgotten what he had done, and now the cold looks and manner of the boys were so plain, that it at once suggested itself to Alec that some one had heard of, and told, what he had done.

There was no time then for explanation. When the morning classes were over a great chum of Alec's, named George Willis, came up to him and said,

"I say, Alec, I heard Fred Austen cramming the fellows with a lot of lies about you yesterday night. He's got some cock-and-bull story about a watch, and is spreading it everywhere. I wish

you'd give him a good thrashing, or let me do it for you. There's Scott, and Paget, and half a dozen others, all ready to stick up for you, if you will only look sharp; the thing will get to the principal, then there will be a row."

Alec grew sick and faint. "Thy sin shall find thee out," rang in his ears. The day of retribution had come.

George stood looking at his friend, never for an instant doubting but that he could clear himself and defend his rights; then hearing no response, his wrath began to gather. He thought Alec shirked fighting, and, school-boy like, judged him accordingly. At last he said,

"What are you going to do, Alec?"

"It's a lie, but not altogether," burst out Alec; "I'll tell you the whole truth," and he did so. George Willis listened with a grave countenance, for though he quite believed and understood Alec's story, he saw how difficult it would be to get the true story believed and accepted gene-



rally. Alec saw and understood the expression of perplexity upon his friend's face.

"There's only one way, Willis : I'll go straight to the Doctor."

A bright light in George Willis's face was the ready answer.

"Will you, Devlin ? Then it's all right, and we'll floor these nasty, boasting back-biting fellows. I'll keep the school quiet until you have seen the Doctor, but remember, he's a difficult man to deal with where he takes a crotchet, and it's just possible that he has heard Austen's version of the story."

"I don't care ; I did wrong in the beginning but the fellows have no right to judge and condemn me without a hearing ; the Doctor will tell me what to do."

So saying, Alec went off to the study and asked for an interview.

The Doctor, who had just left his class, was standing on the hearth reading a letter ; he saw

plainly by Alec's countenance that the boy was in trouble, so a kindly encouraging smile accompanied the greeting.

"So you want my advice, eh?—well, let me hear the story. I am always glad when my boys come to consult me, and make me a friend as well as master."

Alec's heart was thumping fiercely against his ribs, and as he looked up at the Doctor leaning his back against the chimney-piece, and quietly waiting, a queer sensation, something like seasickness, came across him, but gulping it down he plunged off into his confession and made a clean breast.

The Doctor never moved or spoke; his kind, keen eyes were on the boy's face, reading confirmation of the story, and honest repentance. A quiet, pleased smile lighted up his face as Alec finished.

"You wrote then directly, and told this good sister of yours?"

"Yes, sir, directly Hay's letter came ; it was his advice gave me courage."

"Well, a good friend is a priceless blessing, as you have found. Now I do not see what further atonement you can make for your fault. You have acted like a brave and honest boy. It requires more courage to confess the concealment than the first sin ; every day of deceit gives the false shame a stronger hold upon one. I must see you put right with the school ; you may leave that to me. Now shake hands ; I am very glad you came to me."

Alec scarcely knew what happened during afternoon school. It was by sheer desperation he kept his place in his class, persistingly refusing to see or hear the cold looks or sneers of Fred Austen's supporters.

When the classes were all over for the day, the Doctor's bell rang, and the boys received orders to assemble in the great hall.

Alec knew what was coming, and his face grew

deadly white, but George Willis and two or three others rallied round him, and in the true spirit of boyish chivalry, determined to help him through and trust him, until he was proved to have been the liar that Austen tried to make out.

The Doctor was standing by his reading-desk looking particularly grave, and, as he generally did when very earnest, rather stern. Every boy saw that something very important had happened, and not a few guilty consciences had begun quaking, lest some carefully-concealed faults had come to light. There was a deep silence; some of my readers may probably know how dreadful such a pause is, and how clearly forgotten sins and shortcomings suddenly start up, and show themselves to be deformed, hideous, and shameful.

A wise old philosopher has written, that "a man in great misery may so far lose his measure of time as to think a moment an hour." In that moment of silence, when the Doctor's eyes

seemed searching the expectant faces turned towards him, many a boy lived years of his life over again.

At last the stillness was broken by the full clear tones of the well-known voice. He told them why he had called them together. Putting Alec's story into a few short, clear sentences, he used it as the text whereon to found an earnest lecture upon the evil of adding to a false step or fault by concealment, acting not only the sinner, but the coward, explaining, in his own peculiarly abrupt but kindly way, how easy it is to do wrong, how noble to make atonement and acknowledge the sin done.

When he had spoken for about ten minutes, he called Alec up, and laying his hand upon his shoulder, said,

“You have had a bitter lesson, my young friend, but most of our strength is taught by suffering; you have had the moral courage to confess your fault, and I hope every boy present will, in the

day of temptation, remember and try to imitate your example."

Then there was a pause, broken by George Willis saying, "Three cheers for the Doctor!"

In vain the Doctor held up his hand to enforce silence; the boys nearest him knew the gleam of gratification in his eye, so only laughed and led the cheers, in the midst of which their kind old master put his hand to his ears, and left them to shout as loud as they liked.

Alec had plenty to do shaking hands with all the boys who crowded up. Fred Austen hung back for a day, but came forward at last.

Midsummer was close upon them now, and Alec's only regret was that Madge seemed to think it quite impossible for him to go to the sea-side; still there was good news in store for him; the first intelligence that greeted him being that Lady Mary had a cottage near Dover, and this she had lent to Mrs. Devlin for the summer, taking the use of their little house, while hers was

repairing and painting. "A fair exchange is no robbery," she said, "and I'll be the gainer in having a snug little place, while you, I fear, will find the old cottage overrun with rats and mice. Still it is close to the sea, and the bairns will sleep too sound to mind such wild animals. Tell Tommy, if they bite him, to write and tell me, and I'll send Hugh down with a waggonful of traps. As it is, I think I'll send him with you just to do the mending, and put his education to the test, and then as there is a boat, Alec and he can supply you with fish, and send me a basket up now and then."

So it was that the good old lady provided change and pleasant quarters for her new friends, and, writing to tell Jack Hay what she had done, confessed it was for love of Madge, and that she was quite in love with her and jealous of him.

I do not think there is much more to be said. I dare say my readers quite understand that when Jack Hay came home on leave, he found Madge

dearer and better than ever ; so dear and good, indeed, that Jack thought he could not live without her, and accordingly asked her to be his wife, a consummation long anticipated by the older lookers-on, and a matter of great rejoicing to Lady Mary, who, finding Madge's mother divided against the loss of her daughter and the great happiness waiting her in a home such as Jack Hay could give her, came boldly forward, and literally talked Mrs. Devlin down, reasoning her into her own way of thinking, by the clear force of will.

So, like all really nice stories, mine ends happily, and leaves all our friends in the fair plain road to prosperity and happiness.

THE END.





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